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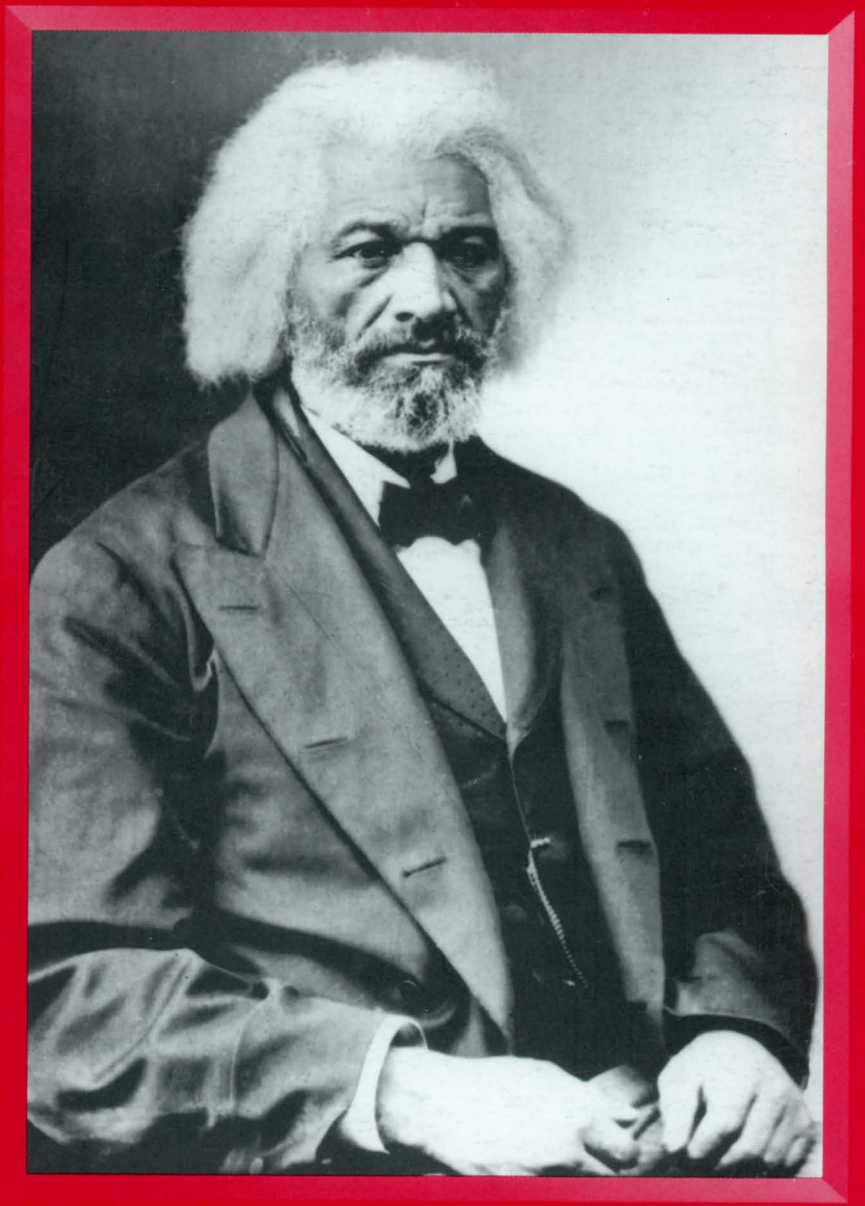
Slavery and Resistance



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Carol Kammen

The UGRR and Local History

There is probably no subject more troublesome to local historians than the underground railroad. Conceived in secrecy, conducted in silence, it has few records to tell its story—and probably far too many places credited as being associated with it.

Sources are the main problem—the lack of them and the responsible use of those that do exist. "I had a diary giving the names, dates, and circumstances of all the slaves I had helped run away," wrote John Parker, himself an escaped slave and thereafter an aide to runaways who came through Ripley, Ohio. Parker explains, however, that as a family man, a property owner, and the proprietor of a business, he had a great deal to lose if his record book were discovered. So "as a matter of safety I threw this diary into the iron furnace, for fear it might fall into other hands."[1]

This caution was shared. Parker explains that after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 "everyone engaged in the work destroyed all existing evidence of his connection with it." The work of aiding fugitives, however, continued apace. "In fact," he writes, it was, "more aggressively than ever [pursued] which speaks well for the conscience and courage" of those involved.[2]

Under the circumstances, it is easy to see that the sources of study of the underground railroad are difficult to come by and why those that have survived are especially to be treasured. It is also easy to understand why local enthusiasts, eager to find evidence of abolition activity, have expanded upon those sources with folklore and fiction, suspending critical analysis at the very time when they need to take the most care.

Yet, precisely because reliable information is scarce, the local historian needs to be even more vigilant regarding the subject. A casual collection of the oral and the supposed, the romantic and the impossible, bring doubt down around the entire topic—which is exactly the opposite of the desired result.

About no other local topic, except possibly the weather, are there more legends, more hearsay, or more dubious claims; about no other topic is there more to question. Yet footnotes, when they appear, tend to recite earlier works that contained no notes or ones that are dubious. In a field where much information has been gathered orally, it is important that the reason why an informant needs to be believed should be given. In one article on the underground railroad the author cites an undocumented and untrustworthy church history, a pamphlet written without footnotes, and repeats stories heard from a variety of people—some of whom had reason to have valuable information while others did not.

Throughout New York there is the frequently heard assertion that there were tunnels. There was once a tunnel, "they say" from a farm road to a local temperance tavern through which escaped slaves moved on their way to the lake and a boat ride to the North. The stretch of land through which the tunnel was supposed to exist is one-and-a-half miles long. The terrain in that part of the state, from which this legend was collected, is glacial deposit; the soil is sometimes 13 inches or less deep and it rests upon shale. The critical mind should note that today when the New York State Department of Transportation improves a local road it brings in an assortment of yellow work trucks that include dozers and bucket-loaders and jack hammers and sometimes even dynamite. If that is what happens in the 1990s in order to dig out side ditches and improve the road bed or to create a new road altogether, it seems logical to conclude that in the 1850s a farmer with nothing but a shovel and ax is unlikely to have dug a mile-and-a-half-long tunnel for escaping slaves. Nonetheless, tunnel myths abound![3]

A disbelief in this tunneling does not diminish the fact that there was underground railroad activity in the area. To separate fact from fiction is the historian's job and it can be done knowing full well that the genuine accounts present us a thrilling enough story without needing embellishment.

There are good sources, of course, in addition to Parker's diary, or the notes kept by William Still and others. From Troy, New York, there is a particularly helpful and illuminating reference from the local newspaper in which a meeting of the Vigilant Committee reported that 57 persons had passed through their care in the previous year at a cost to the society of $125.40.

In Ithaca there was a lawyer named Ben Johnson. A local historian, interviewing an African-American resident—"colored" he would have called himself—regarding Johnson, heard of the attorney's efforts to aid slaves to freedom. Johnson would say that he was a Christian, and member of the church, and a lawyer, and a Democrat and therefore a law abiding citizen: that he could not consistently assist in depriving men of their property. "No," he insisted, "he could not do such an

unlawful act." But Johnson also commented as he turned over a five or ten dollar note, "take it and buy tickets, and send the runaway slaves back to their masters." He knew, and others knew, that the money for tickets would be used to send the runaways further on their way, usually by steamboat on "toward the North Star." Thus, saying one thing and meaning another was Johnson's way of abiding by the law and breaking it at the same time.[5]

That there was abolition and underground activity in the area is something on which we can all agree. The extent of that aid is another thing altogether and it demands that we be cautious. And especially important, in any discussion of the underground railroad, is the fact that those who aided fugitives did so in a climate of hostile views by many of their townspeople. John Parker noted that in Ripley, Ohio, where there was considerable underground activity, "the town itself was proslavery as well as the country around it." And this antagonism, either in the form of strikes against underground activity, or in the form of a lack of willingness to aid or to participate, is very much a part of the story to be told.[6]

The interesting question to ask is why so much interest in underground railroad history should be erupting at just this time. There are many possible answers. The Sanctuary movement conducted by some Americans to aid and shelter Central Americans who have fled to this country for refuge might have spurred interest in the older activity. This modern movement echoes many of the problems faced by those involved in the earlier effort.

There has been some recent popular fiction that addresses the topic, too, such as David Bradley's complex novel, *The Chaneysville Incident,* and Miriam Grace Monfredo's *North Star Conspiracy,* in which her Seneca Falls librarian-detective Glynis Tryon solves a mystery that originated with the underground railroad.[7] In addition, underground railroad activities have been featured on television shows and the underground railroad is an active destination on the Internet. Tony Cohen, a Maryland historian, has popularized an interest in the railroad by walking one of the supposed routes and posting notices online along the way. Newspapers, too, have cited underground railroad sites as tourist attractions.[8]

Most importantly, local historians have also turned to the subject in their search for understanding and illuminating African-American local history, which until recently has been long neglected in the local canon and difficult to research because of the lack of many of the traditional sorts of records.

These are symptoms of current interest in the subject. The most overriding reason for a revival of history of underground activity is surely that in this nation where race has been identified as a pressing national concern, tales of the underground railroad soothe misgivings about the nature of that conflict. They stress interracial cooperation, giving some people a way of asserting moral correctness about the position they think they would have—or that their communities did take. This is because actions of those involved in the underground railroad rested on clear moral choices that seem to us today to be supportable or unsupportable. Underground railroad activity becomes a clear symbol of positive behavior in our long national anguish over race. It is a way of saying that all white people were not guilty, that black and white together aided the fugitive to escape an unjust situation.

But desiring to claim the moral high road and finding evidence to do so are two very different things. And while the public is often willing to suspend critical thinking regarding the underground railroad, and while local publicists and local color writers are touting cultural tourism and actively incorporating every shred of fiction into the local story, it is clearly up to the local historian to proceed with caution.[9]

I have found that the local historians are doing just that. In the face of casual disregard of the facts and a desire to find links that make a community or group or individual look good on this topic, it is the local historians I have encountered who are saying, "Wait! let's look at this and see what the facts really tell us, what we can honestly assert." The problem, however, is that school teachers, in particular, and others in general, are so eager for any information that whatever is available—especially in print—is likely to be believed and used.

This does not mean that we should abandon any interest or research into the story of the underground railroad. It does mean that fact needs to be separated from folklore—every root cellar was not a hidey-hole and sure evidence of abolitionist activity, not every Quaker household participated in aiding the fugitive, although many did—that we must judge the evidence carefully and put the story of the underground railroad into its context. This means we must admit that locally there were many people, often the majority of the population as Parker suggests, who were unwilling to aid the fugitives and even anxious to turn them—and those who helped them—over to the authorities.[10]

The story of the underground railroad is more complicated and interesting than simply one of escaped slaves and those, black and white, who aided their progress north. The story is really one of community conflict, of moral decision-making, of the law abiding—who therefore were those who

did not aid fugitives, even if they might have wanted to—and of those courageous people who took risks in order to lend a needed hand. The story is also of communities known as safe and those that were decidedly unsafe. It is the story of a shifting network of routes that changed with time and local attitudes, one particular route used on one day, a different way on another. It is the story of churches that split apart over this issue and of ministers finding ways of justifying the return of slaves because they were under the aegis of the laws of Caesar, not the laws of God.[11]

All of this makes the underground railroad even more interesting and important because in context it becomes an episode in courage and moral character. It is and will always remain a story of helpers of both races willing to risk their own safety to aid those in need.

We need to relate what can be verified within a local context. We need to stress the *ad hoc,* unsystematic nature of the passage of fugitives from the South. We need to acknowledge the risky nature of giving aid and the unwillingness of good people to do so. And we need to celebrate the genuine heroes of the era. John P. Parker of Ripley, Ohio was certainly one of them.

Notes

1 See *His Promised Land,* edited by Stuart Seely Sprague (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp, 99-100.

2 Ibid., p. 127. And see pp. 72 and 126.

3 In 1996 there was a discussion of the underground railroad tunnels in the state on New York history net (Nyhistory-1@unix.nysed.gov) during the late fall of 1966. Tales of tunnels were identified in a number of localities.

4 *Troy Daily Times,* October 6, 1857. I am indebted to Lorraine Weiss of the Rensselaer County (N.Y.) Historical Society for this citation.

5 Thomas W. Burns, *Initial ithacans: Sketches and Portraits of the forty-Four presidents of the Village of Ithaca* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1904), p. 14.

6 *His Promised Land,* p. 99.

7 David Bradley, *The Chaneysville Incident* (New York, 1981) is in paper as a Monfredo's Mystery (New York, 1993).

8 See Owen A. Thomas, *Niagara's Freedom Trail: A Guide to African-Canadian History on the Niagara Peninsula* (Published by the Region Niagara tourist council, 11995), Evanarie Hardin, *Syracuse and the Underground Railroad* (Pamphlet published by the Erie Canal museum, Syracuse, 1998), and see *New York Times* June 28, 1992, pp 8-9 "Ontario's Lode of Black History."

9 For overly inclusive use of references to the underground railroad see Emerson Klees, *Underground Railroad Tales: With Routes Through the Finger Lakes Region* (Rochester, 1997). This book, which is very handsomely illustrated and engagingly written provides a prime example of historical sources in the hands of a local colorist or publicist. Kless includes everything, many items base upon very tentative or bogus information. He seems to function on the principle that anything in print is true so that his book rests upon long ago discarded tales and shaky evidence. The large and attractive map that was issued by Kless' illustrator, Dru Wheelin is equally troublesome. While the map is handsome and the illustrations attractive, it misleads by the very presence of charted routes across the state much as one would find on a AAA triptick in addition to several features "stops" that are strongly disputed by historians who have researched the subject. It is particularly unfortunate that such attractive material is not to be trusted for the general public has no way of making a critical assessment.

10 See Marvis Vinovskis, ed., *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays* (New York, 1990). And see, too, Larry Gara, *Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (reprint edition 1996, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996).

11 Dividing church congregations in Cortland County are in Curtis D. Johnson's *Islands of Holiness: Rural Religion in Upstate New York 1790-1860* (Ithaca, 1989) especially Chapter 10 and see page 130. This can be found elsewhere in the area as well. See Carol Kammen, *The Peopling of Tompkins County: A Social History* (Interlaken, N.Y: 1985) p. 134 especially. Local ministers sometimes had ways of justifying slavery. A notable example would be William Wisner, *Elements of Civil Liberty, or The Way to Maintain Free Institutions* (Ithaca, 1844) in which Wismer argues that slavery fell under the rules of the state, not under the aegis of God, and therefore, as "both these kingdoms are ordained and recognized by the Almighty" they must co-exist in the same state. He also argues that the Sunday church service was no place in which to discuss political subjects given as it was a time to attend to spiritual matters.

Carol Kammen is the author of On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why and What it Means *(Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1996), several books of local history, and the editorials in "History News." She teaches local history at Cornell University and has written a number of dramas based upon historical themes. One drama, "Flight to the North," is about the underground railroad.*